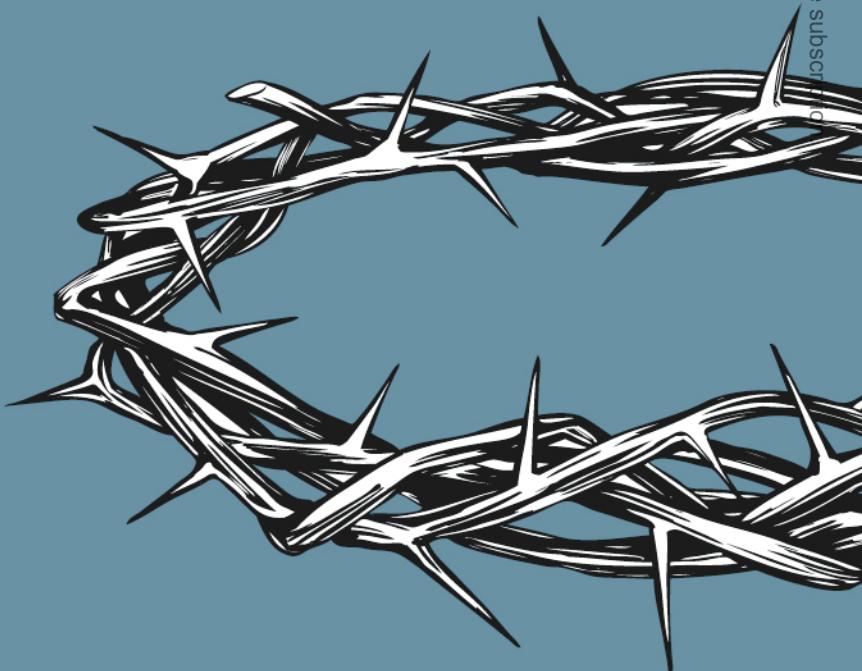


8 STUDIES
+ LEADER NOTES

MATTHEW 13-17

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The Unexpected Kingdom



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The Unexpected Kingdom

MATTHEW 13-17

BY PETER COLLIER

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The Unexpected Kingdom

Pathway Bible Guides: Matthew 13-17

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Before you begin

The Jesus of Nazareth presented in Matthew's Gospel is a very impressive figure. Right from the start of the Gospel, Matthew shows that Jesus was the descendant of great King David, and God's promised eternal king. Jesus did amazing and miraculous deeds like no other figure in history. He fulfilled prophecy after prophecy to show that he was indeed the king that God had promised. The Gospel finishes with Jesus, after he's been raised from the dead, proclaiming: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt 28:18).

And yet, sometimes Jesus' *kingdom* doesn't seem nearly as impressive as the king himself. When John the Baptist—who was in prison at the time—heard how Jesus' kingdom was shaping up, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matt 11:3).

If Jesus was God's promised king, the one who was going to bring in God's kingdom by restoring righteousness to Israel, and bringing justice, and setting everything right... then what on earth was John the Baptist, the righteous prophet, doing in jail? What kind of kingdom was this? At that point it looked fairly unimpressive, or even disappointing. In fact, you couldn't really see much evidence of God's kingdom at all. And it caused John's disciples to wonder whether Jesus was really king after all.

These questions aren't too dissimilar from the questions people have today about Christ and his kingdom—questions like, "How can Jesus be king when his followers and his church are so disappointing and muck so many things up?"

And we can think similarly, especially when the heat is really on or we're feeling discouraged. We might wonder: "Is it really worth it following this king? His kingdom looks so unimpressive! Is it really worth going through hardships for a kingdom like this?"

These questions and doubts came as no surprise to Jesus. In fact, he totally anticipated them, and not only dealt with them but actually explained why they come.

Perhaps nowhere in the Gospels is this clearer than in Matthew 13-17. In this section we see that as Jesus taught about the kingdom of heaven, he stressed again and again—in both his words and his actions—that this kingdom is different to what people would naturally anticipate: it is an *unexpected kingdom*. This is what makes examining this part of Matthew's Gospel both so important and so stimulating. As we begin this section, you should expect to have your assumptions about God's king and God's kingdom challenged!

My prayer is that you will respond to Jesus like the apostle Peter, who said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16), and rejoice that you are part of this king's unexpected kingdom.

1. Do you have ears to hear?

MATTHEW 13:1-23



Getting started

'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.' Can you think of any examples where this is the case? Why is this saying often true?

What might be a wise response to having only a little knowledge of something important?



Light from the Word

Read Matthew 13:1-23.

1. This passage begins with one of Jesus' most famous parables, known as 'The Parable of the Sower'. Fill out the following table to unpack what it means:

Soil type (vv. 4-8)	Result of sowing (vv. 4-8)	What the result symbolizes (vv. 18-23)

2. From this parable, what responses can we expect when we tell people the gospel:

- in the short term?

- in the medium term?
 - in the long term?
3. Why might this be helpful to know?
 4. Who hears Jesus speak in this section? (See also verses 34 and 36.)

5. What do you think the difference is between someone who “hears” and someone who “understands” (vv. 13, 14, 15, 19, 23)?
 6. The disciples ask Jesus why he speaks in parables (v. 10). What answer does Jesus give?
 7. The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven is given to some and not others (v. 11). Why? Is this unfair?

8. “To the one who has, more will be given” (v. 12). The one who has what?



To finish

Do you have ‘ears to hear’ Jesus’ teaching?

This passage tells us that the deceitfulness of wealth and the cares of this world choke the word. Have you seen it happen? How can we work at preventing this:

- in ourselves?
- in others?



Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks to God for giving us right expectations about how his word will be received, and that it will ultimately produce a crop many times what is sown.
- Ask the Lord of the harvest for ears to truly hear his word and understand it with your heart.

2. What the kingdom of heaven is like

MATTHEW 13:24-52



Getting started

What would people today expect a 'kingdom of God' to be like? Would you agree with them?



Light from the Word

Read Matthew 13:24-30 and 36-43.

1. Look at the parable of the weeds (vv. 24-30) and the explanation Jesus gives (vv. 36-43). What do each of the following things in the parable represent?

- the sower
- the field
- the good seed
- the weeds
- the enemy who sows the seeds
- the harvest
- the reapers (i.e. those who harvest)

2. From this parable, what should we expect to happen to those who oppose Jesus, both now and in the future?

Read Matthew 13:47-50.

3. Look at the parable of the net. What does this teach about the end of the age?
4. How is this parable similar to the parable of the weeds? How is it different?

5. Summarize in a sentence the main point of these other parables in the passage. What does each parable teach us about the kingdom of heaven?
 - the parable of the mustard seed (vv. 31-32)
 - the parable of the yeast (vv. 33)
 - the parable of the hidden treasure (v. 44)
 - the parable of the pearl (vv. 45-46)
6. Looking back at the whole passage, what do we learn about what the kingdom of heaven is like now?

7. What expectations ought this to give us about life and ministry in this age?
8. What encouragement is there from knowing these things about the kingdom of heaven? How might we be discouraged if we didn't know these things?
9. What do we learn from these parables about what will happen in the *future*?

10. Is this encouraging or alarming to know? Why?

11. How might this passage help you answer someone who says, “I don’t believe God is going to judge people”?

12. What are the dangers of expecting the future aspects of the kingdom of heaven now?



To finish

What specific things are you tempted to value more than the kingdom of heaven? Are you prepared to give those things up for the sake of the kingdom?



Give thanks and pray

- Thank God that Jesus has told us what the kingdom of heaven is like.
- Pray that we would regard the kingdom of heaven as such precious treasure that we would be prepared to give up everything for it and its king.
- Pray for yourself, your family, and your friends and acquaintances to be like the ‘wheat’ and the ‘good fish’.

3. Isn't this the carpenter's son?

MATTHEW 13:53-14:36



Getting started

'Familiarity breeds contempt.' What does this saying mean? Do you think it's true? Can you give examples where this is the case?



Light from the Word

Read Matthew 13:53-58.

1. What do people in Jesus' hometown think of him?
2. What is the basis of their opinion?
3. How can similar things shape people's opinions about Jesus today?
4. How can we avoid (and encourage others to avoid) this danger?

Read Matthew 14:1-36.

5. What is Herod's opinion of Jesus? Who does he think Jesus is?
 6. What is influencing his opinion?
 7. How can similar things influence people's opinion about Jesus (and his followers) today?

8. How can we avoid (and encourage others to avoid) this danger?

9. In chapter 14, Matthew seems to be making a comparison between Jesus and Herod. Fill in the following table to work out these differences:

	Verse	Adjective/s that could be used to describe him
Herod		
Jesus		

10. What do you think is the main contrast between Herod and Jesus in this passage?

Read Matthew 14:13-36 again.

11. What are the disciples' opinions of Jesus in this passage?

12. What are the reasons for these opinions? Are they well founded?

13. Why do you think Peter doubted (vv. 28-31)? How are we sometimes like him?



To finish

“Truly you are the Son of God” (v. 33). Is that your opinion of Jesus? What will this look like for you in your life?



Give thanks and pray

- Thank God for giving us a great king in Jesus who is kind and compassionate, as well as powerful.
- Pray that you would trust in Jesus as the Lord who rules over all and live a life that reflects his lordship.

4. The diagnosis of the human heart

MATTHEW 15:1-20



Getting started

What religious traditions are you familiar with?



Light from the Word

Read Matthew 15:1-20.

1. What issue is troubling the Pharisees and scribes (teachers of the law)?
2. What does Jesus have to say about the Pharisees and scribes?
3. The Pharisees simply ask Jesus why his disciples don't ceremonially wash their hands. Why is he so harsh with them?

4. Why is Jesus not concerned to have his disciples wash their hands before they eat? How is their attitude different to the Pharisees and scribes?
 5. What dangers are there with all human traditions?
 6. How are we tempted to “break the commandment of God for the sake of [our] tradition” (v. 3)?

7. How can we avoid doing this?

 8. 1 Samuel 16:7 tells us that “man looks on the outward appearance but the LORD looks on the heart”. According to Matthew 15:18-19, what is it that God sees in human hearts?

 9. Jesus has described himself as a ‘doctor’ to sinners (Matt 9:12). Here, the Pharisees are offended by Jesus’ diagnosis. How would our society feel about Jesus’ diagnosis of the condition of the human heart?



To finish

What diagnosis does Jesus give about the condition of your heart?
How do you feel about his diagnosis?

What do you think is the right way to respond to Jesus' teaching here?



Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks to God for his provision of a 'doctor' for sick sinners who can give an accurate diagnosis of—and remedy for—the true nature of our condition.
- Ask God for forgiveness if ever you have merely honoured him with your lips while your heart has been far from him, or if you have used human traditions to set aside what he says to do in his word.

5. Who, then, can be clean?

MATTHEW 15:21-28



Getting started

What are some of the benefits of rain? How many can you list here?



Light from the Word

Read Matthew 15:21-28.

1. What is unusual or surprising in this passage?
2. What do we know about the woman who comes to Jesus in this section? (See Deuteronomy 7:1-2.)
3. How would the Pharisees have regarded this woman?

4. Compare Jesus' response to the woman with the response of the disciples.
5. What is Jesus' dilemma?
6. What does the woman's response in verse 27 show?

Look back to Matthew 15:1-20.

7. How does the Canaanite woman compare with the Pharisees and the disciples? (Look ahead to Matthew 16:1-12 for further insight.)

Look back to Matthew 13:53-58.

8. How does the woman's attitude to Jesus compare with the attitude of those from Capernaum?



To finish

The Canaanite woman comes asking Jesus for mercy, which he grants to her when he hears her acknowledge that she is unclean. From this account, what do we learn about Jesus and who can receive mercy from him?

What can we learn from the Canaanite woman about how we are to approach Jesus?



Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks to God that no-one is beyond his mercy.
- Give thanks that the ministry of Jesus, the Shepherd of Israel, has blessings that overflow to people from all nations.
- Pray that we, like the Canaanite woman, would recognize our unworthiness before Jesus and come to him for mercy.

6. Understanding the signs of the times

MATTHEW 15:29-16:12



Getting started

Do you know any signs that tell you what the weather is going to be like? What are they? What do you do when you see them?



Light from the Word

Read Matthew 15:29-39.

1. Compare the feeding of the four thousand people here with the feeding of the five thousand people described in Matthew 14:13-21.
 - What are the similarities?
 - What are the differences?
2. “And they glorified the God of Israel” (v. 31). What does this suggest about who is in this crowd?

3. Why do you think Matthew records such a similar miracle? (Think about the fact that this comes soon after the healing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman in 15:21-28.)

4. Jesus says he has “compassion on the crowd” (v. 32). What evidence is there of that? How does he compare with the Pharisees? (Look back to 15:1-2 and 12:1-8.)

Read Matthew 16:1-12.

5. The Pharisees and Sadducees come to test Jesus (v. 1).
 - What is that test?

- Why does Jesus refuse their test?

Read Matthew 12:38-41.

6. This is not the first time the Pharisees had asked Jesus for a sign. When they asked the same thing of Jesus in Matthew 12:38, he gave them the same response that he gives them now.

- What did Jesus say about the ‘sign of Jonah’ in 12:41?

- Why might this ‘sign of Jonah’ be particularly relevant now, given what has just happened in Tyre and Sidon?

7. Why is it evil that the Pharisees and Sadducees seek for a sign (both in 12:38 and 16:4)?
 8. What would you say to someone who asks for a sign today?
 9. What is “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (16:6)? (Recall 15:1-20 and look ahead to 22:23, 29.)



To finish

How are we to “watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (16:6)?

What do you think is the right way to “interpret the signs of the times” (16:3) in this passage? How should we respond to Jesus?



Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks that all the blessings Jesus brings to the lost sheep of Israel are also available to those outside of Israel.
- Ask for forgiveness for when you have been like the Pharisees—outwardly appearing righteous but inwardly full of hypocrisy.
- Pray that God would guard you from having lips that honour him but a heart that is far from him.

7. How do you find life?

MATTHEW 16:13-28

Getting started

Throughout history, people have died for all kinds of causes. An article in *The Guardian* asked: “Are there any causes you should be prepared to die for? Or is it always wrong to die for any abstract idea?”¹ What do you think? What would it take to convince you to be willing to die for something (or someone)?

1 ‘Are there beliefs to die for?’, *The Guardian*, 11 May 2009 (viewed 31 May 2017): www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/may/08/conscientious-objection-war-religion



Light from the Word

Read Matthew 16:13-20.

1. In this passage we find out what some of Jesus' contemporaries thought of him. What are their opinions?
2. In verse 19, what does Jesus say about Peter's future?

Read Acts 10:39-48.

3. Acts 10-11 records the first time a Gentile (someone who isn't Jewish) is baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. How are Jesus' words to Peter in Matthew 16:18-19 fulfilled in this passage from Acts?

Read Matthew 16:21-23.

4. Jesus now starts to talk about what is in store for him in Jerusalem. He tells his disciples that he will suffer and die, and will be raised on the third day.
 - a. How does Peter react?
 - b. How does Jesus then respond to Peter?
 - c. Why is this surprising? (Recall 16:13-20.)
 - d. What hasn't Peter yet understood about the Christ?

Read Matthew 16:24-28.

5. List the three things Jesus requires of his disciples in verse 24.

-
-
-

6. In verses 25-27, what encouragement does Jesus give us to keep going as his followers, even though it's hard?

7. Thinking about what Jesus says here, what dangers are there when someone gives a gospel message that promises prosperity here and now?

Note: These next two passages given in questions 8 and 9 will help us to make sense of Jesus' words in verses 27-28.

Read Daniel 7:13-14.

8. What does Daniel prophesy will happen after the “one like a son of man” has come to the Ancient of Days?

Read Matthew 28:16-18.

9. When Jesus appears to his disciples after he has been raised from the dead, what does Jesus say he has been given?

10. How do the passages from Daniel 7 and Matthew 28 help us understand what Jesus means when he says: “I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (in Matthew 16:28)?

11. Look again at what Jesus says in 16:21, and keep 16:28 in mind. Why should we trust Jesus' opinion about the future?



To finish

What might you need to deny yourself for the sake of Jesus and the gospel? What might you be tempted to save or hold on to, and yet lose eternal life for?



Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks that God has given us a Messiah who suffered, died and was raised, and who opened up the way into the kingdom of heaven.
- Ask God to give you the strength to be able to deny yourself, take up your cross, and lose your life to follow Jesus.

8. Listen to the Son who pays taxes

MATTHEW 17



Getting started

When asked at a government inquiry about his company's tax minimization schemes, the late Kerry Packer, at the time one of the richest people in Australia, replied:

“Of course I’m minimizing my tax. If anybody in this country doesn’t minimize their tax they want their head read. As a government I can tell you you’re not spending it that well that we should be paying extra.”¹

When (if ever) is it legitimate not to pay tax? Why?

¹ Kerry Packer, quoted in Stephanie Peatling, ‘Corporate tax inquiry: Kerry Packer’s infamous committee appearance serves as a cautionary tale’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April 2015 (viewed 30 May 2017): www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/corporate-tax-inquiry-kerry-packers-infamous-committee-appearance-serves-as-a-cautionary-tale-20150408-1mgfaq.html



Light from the Word

Read Matthew 17:1-12.

1. This chapter begins with an extraordinary event known as the ‘transfiguration’ of Jesus. Describe in your own words what happens to Jesus here.
2. At Jesus’ baptism, in Matthew 3:13-17, God’s voice declared from heaven: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”. Why might “the voice from the cloud” be declaring this to the disciples again at this time (17:5)?
3. The voice adds one other thing that was not said at Jesus’ baptism. What is it? And what might the significance of this be at this time?

Read Malachi 3:1 and 4:5-6.

4. What did the prophet Malachi say would happen after ‘Elijah’ came?
5. “Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist” (Matt 17:13). In light of what you’ve just read in Malachi, why is it so significant that John the Baptist is identified as ‘Elijah’?

Read Matthew 17:14-23.

6. What reasons do the disciples have for being discouraged?
7. In verse 23 Matthew tells us that the disciples were “greatly distressed”. Why do you think they responded in this way?

Read Matthew 17:24-27.

8. Jesus gets Peter to pay the temple tax. What is so surprising about this?

Look back at the whole of Matthew 17.

9. List the extraordinary claims Jesus makes in this chapter.

Verse(s)	Claim
vv. 9, 23	
v. 20	
v. 22	
vv. 25-26	

10. How are some of these claims backed up by the events of this passage? How might this have encouraged the discouraged disciples?



To finish

What things can cause you to be discouraged, distressed or doubtful in your walk with Jesus?

What encouragement is there in this passage for when you are feeling like this?



Give thanks and pray

- Give thanks that Jesus is the all-powerful Son of Man, who is prepared to pay taxes to serve those who would persecute him.
- Pray that God would help you to trust in Jesus in the face of distress, discouragement and doubt.

For the leader

What are Pathway Bible Guides?

The Pathway Bible Guides aim to provide simple, straightforward Bible study material for:

- Christians who are new to studying the Bible (perhaps because they've been recently converted or because they have joined a Bible study group for the first time)
- Christians who find other studies¹ too much of a stretch.

Accordingly, we've designed the studies to be short, straightforward and easy to use, with a simple vocabulary. At the same time, we've tried to do justice to the passages being studied, and to model good Bible-reading principles. We've tried to be simple without being simplistic; no-nonsense without being no-content.

The questions and answers assume a small group context, but it should be easy to adapt them to suit different situations, such as individual study and one-to-one.

Your role as leader

Because many in your group may not be used to reading and discussing a Bible passage in a group context, a greater level of responsibility will fall to you as the leader of the discussions. There are the usual responsibilities of preparation, prayer and managing group dynamics. In addition, there will be an extra dimension of forming and encouraging good Bible reading habits in people who may not have much of an idea of what those habits look like.

Questions have been kept deliberately brief and simple. For this reason, you may have to fill in some of the gaps that may have been addressed in, say, an Interactive Bible Study. Such 'filling in' may take the form of asking follow-up

¹ Such as the Interactive Bible Study (IBS) series also available from Matthias Media.

questions, or using your best judgement to work out when you might need to supply background information. That sort of information, and some suggestions about other questions you could ask, may be found in the following leader notes. In addition, a *New Bible Dictionary* is always a useful aid to preparation, and simple commentaries such as those in the *Tyndale* or *Bible Speaks Today* series are often helpful. Consult these resources after you have done your own preparation.

On the question of background information, these studies are written from the assumption that God's word stands alone. God works through his Holy Spirit and the leaders he has gifted—such as you—to make his meaning clear. Assuming this to be true, the best interpreter and provider of background information for Scripture will not be academic historical research, but Scripture itself. Extra historical information may be useful for the purpose of illustration, but it is unnecessary for understanding and applying what God says to us.

The format of the studies

The discussion questions on each passage follow a simple pattern. There is a question at the beginning of each discussion that is intended to get people talking around the issues raised by the passage, and to give you some idea of how people are thinking. If the group turns out to be confident, motivated and comfortable with each other and the task at hand, you may even decide to skip this question. Alternatively, if the group members are shy or quiet, you may decide to think of related types of questions that you could add in to the study, so as to maintain momentum in a non-threatening way.

After the first question, the remaining questions work through the passage sequentially, alternating between observation, interpretation and application in a way that will become obvious when you do your own preparation. The final question of each discussion, just before the opportunity for prayer, could be used in some groups to encourage (say) one person each week to give a short talk (it could be 1 minute or 5 minutes, depending on the topic and the people). The thinking here is that there's no better way to encourage understanding of a passage than to get people to the point where they can explain it to others. Use your judgement in making the best use of this final exercise each week, depending on the people in your group.

In an average group, it should be possible to work through the study in approximately 45 minutes. But it's important that you work out what your group is capable of, given the time available, and make adjustments accordingly. Work out in

advance which questions or sub-points can be omitted if time is short. And have a few supplementary questions or discussion starters up your sleeve if your group is dealing with the material quickly and hungering for more. Each group is different. It's your job as leader to use the printed material as 'Bible *Guides*', and not as a set of questions that you must rigidly stick to regardless of your circumstances.

Preparation: 60/40/20

Ideally, group members should spend half an hour reading over the passage and pencilling in some answers *before* they come to the group. Not every group member will do this, of course, but encourage them with the idea that the more they prepare for the study, the more they will get out of the discussion.

In terms of your own preparation as leader, we recommend you put aside approximately *two hours*, either all at once or in two one-hour blocks, and that you divide up the time as follows:

- 60 minutes reading the passage and answering the questions yourself as best you can (without looking at the leader notes or Bible commentaries)
- 40 minutes consulting the leader notes (plus other resources, like commentaries). Add to your own answers, and jot down supplementary questions or other information that you want to have available as you lead the discussion. Make sure you write everything you need on the study pages—the last thing you want to do is to keep turning to the 'answers' in the back during the group discussion
- 20 minutes praying about the study and for your group members.

This 60/40/20 pattern will help you to focus on the Bible and what it's saying, rather than simply regurgitating to the group what is in the leader notes. Remember, these notes are just that—notes to offer some help and guidance. They are not the Bible! As a pattern of preparation, 60/40/20 also helps you to keep praying for yourself and your group, that God would give spiritual growth as his word is sown in your hearts (see Luke 8:4-15; 1 Cor 3:5-7).

If, for some reason, you have less or more time to spend in preparation, simply apply the 60/40/20 proportions accordingly.

LEADER NOTES

1. Do you have ears to hear?

MATTHEW 13:1-23

► Remember: 60/40/20



Getting started

Matthew 13:1-23 includes what has become known as ‘The Parable of the Sower’, as well as Jesus’ explanations to the disciples about why he only speaks to the crowd in parables, and about the meaning of the parable of the sower.

For people who have read this parable before, it’s almost impossible not to anticipate the interpretation that Jesus gives. Even for those who will read this passage for the first time, the interpretation included at the end can mask a key fact: the crowd listening to Jesus simply heard him say the parable; but the *explanation* was directed to the disciples. It’s ambiguous whether or not the crowd was able to ‘listen in’ to Jesus’ response to his disciples’ question in verses 10-17, or to his explanation of the parable in verses 18-23. What we do know is that they all heard the story of the farmer.

As such, they were given a little knowledge about the kingdom of heaven. But as the saying goes, ‘a little knowledge is a dangerous thing’. This is often true because a small amount of knowledge in one area can mislead us into thinking we know everything on that topic, when in fact there may be vital features that we don’t understand. In this passage we see that this can certainly be the case when it comes to knowledge of Jesus and his kingdom.

When we only have a little knowledge of something important, it’s wise (or even essential) to seek out more knowledge. In this study, we’ll see that Jesus gives more knowledge of himself and his kingdom to those who have ‘ears to hear’—those who are willing to listen and to understand.

Studying the passage

Chapter 13 forms the third of Jesus' five major speeches in Matthew's Gospel. The theme of this speech is *the nature of the kingdom of heaven*. Significantly, this topic is addressed here in the middle of the Gospel, and after John's disciples had asked Jesus the question, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (11:2). John declared, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand" (3:2) and encouraged his followers to look to the greater one coming after him (3:11). Jesus came after him with exactly the same message—and yet John is still in prison, and will soon be beheaded (see Matthew 14). The kingdom that John's disciples were expecting hadn't come yet, and it seems this raised questions about whether or not Jesus was the greater one John had spoken about.

Jesus answers John's disciples' immediate question by pointing to his works as a sign that he was both the one expected from the Old Testament, and the one who had begun to bring in the kingdom. But in this speech he addresses the deeper issues: expectations about what the kingdom of heaven is like, how and when it will come, and therefore what it will look like to be a disciple of this kingdom's king.

The speech contains seven parables. The last six all begin in the same way: "the kingdom of heaven is like..." (see 13:24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47) and obviously speak about the nature of the kingdom of heaven.

But the first parable is different. It is a parable that challenges its hearers about their response to the parables; it is a challenge to have 'ears to hear' (v. 9) what the parables are saying. It is often referred to as 'the parable of the sower', but it could well be described instead as 'the parable of the four soils', for we can summarize the challenge of the parable with the question: "As you hear the sower's word of the kingdom, which soil type are you?"

Broadly this passage comes in three sections. In verses 1-9 Jesus is speaking to large crowds, and he tells them the parable of the sower. In verse 10, the disciples come and ask Jesus a question about why he speaks to the people in parables. Jesus answers this question in verses 11-17. In verses 18-23 he then gives the disciples a command, telling them to listen to what the parable of the sower means, and he then gives that explanation.

From a comprehension point of view, the middle section is the most difficult. The parable itself is very simple to understand—and that's why the first question starts there. It may be best to begin by working through the columns in question 1 from left to right. There are four types of soil, each with four different

reactions to the seed that is sown on them, and these four soils represent the four responses people have to the word of the kingdom that is sown. What is particularly important to understand is that all four soils represent people who hear the word; but it is both hearing and understanding the word that is the appropriate and fruitful response.

Questions may come about whether the one who receives the message with joy but immediately falls away when trouble or persecution comes (vv. 20-21) was in fact saved in the first place. The same question may be asked about those who allow the deceitfulness of wealth and the worries of this life to choke out the word. It is perhaps best not to get distracted by this question in your study, as the parable doesn't give enough information to be able to answer the question. The point of the parable is clearly to encourage people to be like the good soil, enduring persecution and continuing to produce fruit rather than being distracted by the cares of this age.

One implication of this parable is that it gives us right expectations about the ministry of the word of God (question 2). In the short term, there will be people who reject it immediately, and there will be those who seem to accept it too. In the medium term, among those who seemed to accept it, there will be ones whose initial enthusiastic reception of the word is blunted either by persecution or the cares of the world. So as the word of God goes out, there will be disappointments and delay for those looking for fruit from its sowing. But there will also be dramatic results. As the word of God is sown, some will receive it like the good soil and produce a crop that provides a return far greater than what was sown—30, 60 and 100 times what is sown, and sometimes even more. Jesus doesn't specify whether this indicates a multiplication of disciples or the fruits of a changed life. The ambiguity is perhaps deliberate and means that the fruit he is talking about includes both these aspects of 'kingdom growth'.

For people who believe Jesus's word—indeed, for people who lead Bible study groups—this is very helpful to know, and this is what question 3 is getting at. This will help us not to feel discouraged when others respond to God's word negatively, but instead will help us persevere in sharing it. It's also important for those who are examining Jesus' word to see if they believe it, as it will help them to see the folly of dismissing it simply because of people's varied responses to it. Instead they may see those varied responses are actually vindicating of the accuracy of God's word.

Question 4 is not as straightforward a question as it may seem! It is intended

to be a question that provokes deeper investigation and thought, and answers may anticipate some of the later questions.

Large crowds hear Jesus, but there are two groups of hearers. There are many among them who, though hearing, “do not hear” (v. 13). It is only the disciples who respond rightly to Jesus’ command in verse 9 who have ‘ears to hear’. Their ears are blessed “for they hear” (v. 16). Because they have ears to hear, then “more will be given” (v. 12; question 8). But exactly what is it that they are given more of? It is “the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” (v. 11). They hear the parables and, obeying Jesus’ command to hear (vv. 9, 18), are then given more knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. Significantly, those termed ‘disciples’ ask Jesus about his parables—and more is given to them. The disciples will also go on to enquire further about the meaning of the parables (13:36) when they go into the house with Jesus. Again, more secrets of the kingdom are then given to them.

But for those who do not obey Jesus’ command to “hear”, even the knowledge of the kingdom they are given in the parables is taken away from them (v. 12). This is entirely appropriate since they do not want to humbly learn more about the kingdom, and they have no desire to act on the knowledge they get (question 7). So many in the crowd keep on hearing the parables, yet do not “understand with their heart” (v. 15), which is what really matters, rather than merely registering the sound of the parables in one’s ears.



To finish

The parable of the sower acts as a challenge to its hearers. It should cause them to question which type of soil—or which type of hearer—they are. Are they ones who hear and reject the message, or in whom the message doesn’t take root, or who hear and yet choke out the word? The ‘To finish’ question is intended to get people to examine what it will look like for them to respond in obedience. It would be good as part of your preparation to pray for both yourselves and those who will hear Jesus’ words with you—that you would respond like the good soil.

LEADER NOTES

2. What the kingdom of heaven is like

MATTHEW 13:24-52

► Remember: 60/40/20

Getting started

In this passage, Jesus tells six parables that all begin, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” As we have seen, people had false expectations about the kingdom of heaven and what it would look like if and when it came (e.g. John’s disciples in Matthew 11:2-3). So in these parables Jesus is not just teaching about the nature of the kingdom of heaven; he is also correcting false expectations people had about that kingdom. It is therefore helpful to begin this study by examining what expectations different people today have about the kingdom of heaven. The opening question allows for (but doesn’t force) your group members to say what they might expect the kingdom of heaven to be like.

Studying the passage

The parable of the weeds is the longest parable in this section, and has similarities to the parable of the sower. Jesus gives its explanation privately, in a house away from the crowd. It’s given in response to a question from the disciples (v. 36) who clearly have ‘ears to hear’ (v. 9).

Jesus makes clear that most elements in the parable represent something. Because he tells us what each thing represents, question 1 is a simple comprehension question. He tells us that the field represents “the world” (v. 38), which here probably means all humanity.

The most surprising line in this parable is in verse 30: “Let both grow together until the harvest”. From our perspective, it’s very unexpected that the weeds are not weeded out the moment they are discovered—especially because these weeds choke out the seeds in the parable of the sower. Instead, Jesus says the weeds will be dealt with at the harvest. Evil will be ‘weeded out’ at the end of the age, and the people of the evil one will be “thrown into the fiery furnace” (v. 42), while the righteous will shine like the sun (v. 43).

The delay in harvesting out the weeds means two things. Firstly, it causes us to *expect* that both ‘weeds’ and ‘wheat’ grow together. The presence and growth of other kingdoms alongside those in the kingdom of heaven is no surprise to Jesus; indeed, it is the Son of Man who allows both to happen so that the wheat will grow properly. We ought not be surprised (or discouraged) when the other kingdoms seem to grow and flourish alongside Jesus’ kingdom, because Jesus himself anticipated it. This information is important for getting the most out of questions 6-10.

Secondly, the parable of the weeds teaches that there will be a harvest day when the Son of Man will throw all the weeds into the fiery furnace. This provides great incentive to be among the wheat (not the weeds), and to long for others to be among the wheat also. It is important to realize that when Jesus speaks of judgement in verses 41-42, he is no longer speaking parabolically. He is explaining the reality of which the parable speaks. This information is important to keep in mind for question 11.

The parable of the net is similar to the parable of the weeds, though more sharp in its point. It is the only other parable in this section that is accompanied by an explanation (vv. 49-50). This parable focuses on the separation of the wicked from the righteous *at the end of the age*, rather than what the kingdom of heaven is like now. Again, this information is important to keep in mind for question 6.

The other four parables are very brief, and with these it’s best not to try to identify what every detail of the parable represents. Instead, look for the one main point each parable teaches about the kingdom of heaven (question 5). So the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed in that while it becomes very large, it starts very small. It’s like a tiny piece of yeast in 60 pounds of flour in that it ends up affecting everything. It’s like hidden treasure and a pearl of great value in that it’s worth giving up everything you have to acquire it.

In combination, these six parables teach us about both the nature of the kingdom of heaven *now* and in the *age to come*. This is therefore the focus of the rest

of the study in questions 6-12. It's extremely important to know these things for life and ministry in this age, because there will be other kingdoms that may well seem to be growing, and the kingdom of heaven may seem small and insignificant at times—like a mustard seed or a tiny piece of yeast. The kingdom of heaven will have citizens who exist alongside citizens of opposing kingdoms that will also be growing. The true value of the kingdom may well be hidden, and its size and significance not obvious.

If we expect the kingdom to be glorious and unopposed now, we may become naïve and unrealistic. But having right expectations will prevent discouragement and disillusionment. From a ministry perspective, we ought to expect that the work of the kingdom will tend to start small. It may just be a few workers meeting together in an office, or a few parents gathering to pray for their local school.

But these parables do far more than encourage us by simply teaching us the nature of the kingdom of heaven now. They also speak of the reality of judgement at the end of the age—which provides a further encouragement and challenge.

In the end, the kingdom will be surprisingly huge, like a mustard tree. It will affect everything, like yeast in dough. It will be worth more than the greatest buried treasure and the most precious jewel. Whatever the cost in this age, it will all be worth it; it is *the* kingdom to belong to. There is great encouragement in this.

Yet there is great challenge too. For the parable of the weeds and the net in particular make it clear that it will be terrible for those who are not in this kingdom. This provides an encouragement to be in the kingdom whatever the cost, and to want others to be in the kingdom also.

To finish

The parables in this section are not particularly difficult to comprehend. The danger with them is that we will hear them... but not hear them. It's one thing to understand with our heads; it is another to understand with our hearts. To understand with your heart means living as though there is a judgement to come and gladly sacrificing for the sake of this underappreciated kingdom, because we recognize its true worth and know that “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” (Matt 19:29).

LEADER NOTES

3. Isn't this the carpenter's son?

MATTHEW 13:53-14:36

► Remember: 60/40/20

Getting started

'Familiarity breeds contempt', so the saying goes. It means that sometimes we can become so accustomed to good things that we can take them for granted or fail to appreciate how truly great they are. It's true in so many areas of life—we become so familiar with the consistent love of family and friends, or the riches of the country we live in, that we forget what amazing things they are. And it's often the case among the childhood friends of those who grow up to achieve great fame and/or success—people can be so familiar with the memory of that person when they were 'ordinary' that they find it hard to think of them in light of their subsequent achievements. An alternative question you may like to ask to get started is: "Did you grow up with anyone who has gone on to become famous?"

These opening questions are intended to lead into the first section of today's passage, where Jesus is shown contempt in his hometown of Capernaum because people were so familiar with his background that they failed to see who he really was. The 'Getting started' questions will hopefully provide helpful insight towards answering questions 1-4.

Studying the passage

One of the most striking features of this section of Matthew's Gospel is the variety of opinions that are given about Jesus. People in his hometown refer to him in

relation to his family—the carpenter’s son, Mary’s son, the brother of James, Joseph, Simon and Judas (and their sisters; 13:55-56). Herod thinks Jesus is John the Baptist resurrected from the dead (14:2). He is addressed as ‘Lord’ by one of his disciples (14:28). These opinions are scattered throughout this section and so this study aims to guide us through each of these opinions. It’s important to observe the underlying reasons that lie behind these varying responses to Jesus. A key purpose of this study is to examine and understand why people respond to Jesus in the ways that they do, to consider which of these responses is appropriate, and then consider how to imitate or avoid it. You’ll see this in the pattern of the questions.

Your group may notice the movement in the passage from Jesus being dismissed as the carpenter’s son to being worshipped as the Son of God. While some people are amazed at Jesus’ wise teaching and miraculous powers, others are offended. The reason seems to be that familiarity has bred contempt. Because they know Jesus as the carpenter’s son, because they know his mother and brothers and sisters, people in Jesus’ hometown take offence at his extraordinary nature and seem to want to bring him down to earth. Jesus interprets their response with a proverb of his own: “a prophet is not without honour except in his hometown and in his own household” (v. 57). In countries that have a strong Christian heritage, Jesus’ teaching and miraculous powers often find similar dishonour. Questions 1-4 are aimed at drawing these aspects out of the opening section of this passage.

The main body of this passage contains a contrast between the leadership of Herod and Jesus. Herod’s opinion about Jesus is shaped by his guilt over his treatment of another servant of God—John the Baptist, whom Herod had beheaded. As the passage narrates this event, Herod is shown to be distressed, weak, fearful, guilty, easily manipulated, imprisoned by his own desires and boasts, and unable to do what he knows is right because he wants to keep up appearances. (It is difficult not to notice that John the Baptist loses his head for speaking out on God’s will for marriage. As it was in his day, so it is in ours: anyone who advocates for the Bible’s teaching on relationships—be it adultery, divorce, remarriage or same-sex relationships—risks receiving a very negative response.)

Questions 9-10 draw out the contrast between Herod and Jesus, as Matthew seems to be making a deliberate comparison here. Jesus is everything Herod is not. There are also echoes of Herod being like Pharaoh and Jesus being like Moses in the Exodus narrative in this account, which readers may pick up on. The point of the narrative is clear: Jesus is the compassionate king who cares for his people and

is able to satisfy them; Herod is a typical worldly ruler who is a fickle tyrant and whose people are oppressed by his evil nature.

The account of Jesus walking on the water ends with his disciples worshipping him and saying, “Truly, you are the Son of God” (14:33). The events both before (i.e. the miraculous feeding of 5000 men) and after (i.e. the healing of all who even touch Jesus’ garment) reinforce the point that Jesus is the Son of God. But it is what happens on the sea that most clearly emphasizes that Jesus is indeed God himself. In a passage that echoes many parts of the Old Testament, Jesus walks to his disciples on the sea and says “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid” (14:27). His language echoes Isaiah 41:13 and 43:1-2 where God encourages his people not to be afraid because he is with them. Significantly, in Isaiah 41 and 43, God uses his personal name, Yahweh (which is indicated by the word ‘Lord’ in capital letters in English translations). The Greek from which Jesus’ statement “It is I” in Matthew 14:27 is translated is a Greek rendition of God’s personal name (“I am”). Isaiah 43 says Yahweh will ensure his people are not overwhelmed as they pass through the waters; in Isaiah 41 Yahweh says he will hold out his hand to help his people. Having walked on the water to his disciples, Jesus therefore essentially identifies himself to be Yahweh, which is why they are to have courage and not be afraid.

These details about Isaiah 41 and 43 are a little involved, as is the information about the expression, “It is I”. But depending on your group it may be worthwhile teaching these points when considering questions 9-10. It helps to reinforce the extraordinary answer that this passage has given to the question raised at the start of the passage: “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” (13:55).

To finish

The remainder of the study gets readers to consider the implications of Jesus being the Son of God in terms of how we ought to respond to him. Peter initially gives the model response of trusting Jesus—and as a result he is, amazingly, the only other person ever to walk on water! But when he sees the wind, he becomes afraid and doubts Jesus, and then starts to sink. The encouragement is clear: we are to trust Jesus as the Lord who takes his people by the right hand through the waters. We are to recognize and worship Jesus for who he really is: the Son of God who rules over all.

LEADER NOTES

4. The diagnosis of the human heart

MATTHEW 15:1-20

► Remember: 60/40/20

Getting started

In this study we'll be examining Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees and teachers of the law regarding their human religious traditions, and what this says to us about how we think about ours. The first question is therefore intended to get people thinking about what religious traditions they are familiar with—both their own and those of others. If you don't know the religious background of people in your group too well, this question may be very useful in helping you find out more.

Studying the passage

This passage begins with Pharisees and scribes (teachers of the law) coming from Jerusalem to ask Jesus a question. Their question at first seems straightforward: why do Jesus' disciples not wash their hands before they eat? But the real, underlying question (which arose from this behaviour they had observed) is a little more complicated: why do the disciples break the tradition of the elders?

While it may be difficult for us to appreciate, this was a very serious issue. The Old Testament was full of specifications about what the people of Israel had to do in order to be 'clean'. For example, in Leviticus 11-15 there is a long list of laws explaining what made a person clean and unclean, and how someone could be 'purified' after becoming defiled. These specifications concluded in this way (you might want to get your group to look up this verse):

“You shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.” (Lev 15:31)

Under the laws listed in Leviticus there were certain foods that were deemed unclean, which the people of Israel were not to eat:

“...and you shall not defile yourselves with them, and become unclean through them. For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.” (Lev 11:43b-44)

But these regulations raised questions. How were the people of Israel not to be defiled through these unclean foods? How were they to prevent themselves from becoming unclean in this way? Among the people of Israel, a ‘tradition of elders’ had arisen *in addition* to those given in places like Leviticus 11-15. One of these traditions was that people were to wash their hands before they ate (and their bowls and utensils also). The intention here was not to promote excellent hygiene—although that was surely a consequence! Rather, the motivation behind it was to keep *clean*, and so be *holy*.

This background helps us understand what was troubling the Pharisees and scribes. They were concerned that because Jesus’ disciples didn’t obey the tradition of the elders, they didn’t care about being defiled. And since they didn’t care about being defiled, presumably they didn’t care about being holy either. Because they were following Jesus’ teaching, the implication was that it was Jesus who was encouraging people not to care about these things. It was a very serious matter. That such a contingent of Pharisees and scribes would come all the way from Jerusalem to enquire about it indicates how importantly they viewed the issue.

Given this context, Jesus’ response to the Pharisees seems harsh! He calls them hypocrites (v. 7) and “blind guides” (v. 14), and tells them that Isaiah prophesied against them and that their worship is in vain (v. 9). The implication of what he says in verse 13 is that *they* are the ones who are defiled.

Question 3 asks why this is the case. The answer is found in thinking about the ‘question behind the question’—that is, we need to think about the motivation behind the Pharisees’ enquiry, and their fastidiousness about observing the traditions of the elders. While holiness might have been the original motivation behind the establishment of the traditions of the elders, Jesus sees that holiness

is no longer what motivates the Pharisees' concerns; in fact, he can see that the reverse is true.

He points this out by asking them a question about why they break the commandments of God for the sake of *their* traditions, and gives the example of how they do this with their traditions about gifts "given to God" (v. 5). Offerings given to the temple were consecrated, or set apart, and so were not to be used for other purposes. The tradition of the elders taught that if someone *intended* to give an offering to the temple treasury, it too was consecrated and so could not be used for other purposes. So, according to the Pharisees, if anyone declares what *might* have been used to help their parents is 'devoted to God', then they can avoid giving it to their parents. The Pharisees were using this *tradition* that God had not commanded to avoid using their means to fulfil their duties toward their parents, which was something God *did command*. Jesus can see that the Pharisees and teachers of the law were not concerned with obeying God's word—and therefore were not concerned about holiness. They were instead using rules that God had not given (namely, the traditions of the elders) to set aside God's word.

Jesus quotes from Isaiah 29:13 after he says to the Pharisees "You hypocrites!" (v. 7). This is not simply a random verse about people who worship God in mouth only. It is a prophecy where God is speaking about judgement coming on Jerusalem (and remember, that's where the Pharisees are from). The prophecy also goes on to condemn people for "turn[ing] things upside down" and going to great depths to hide their plans from the Lord (Isa 29:15, 16). God promises he will make the humble rejoice, but he will also cut down those "who by a word make a man out to be an offender" (Isa 29:21). This, of course, is exactly what the Pharisees were doing.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees and scribes strikes at the heart of all human religious traditions. Traditions that may have been established with good intentions, to help people to obey the commands of God, actually have been used to set aside those very commands. Traditions can so easily be elevated above the word of God. When this happens, Jesus declares: though people may "honour me with their lips... in vain do they worship me" (vv. 8-9).

This points to the dangers of human traditions. We can use human traditions, even religious traditions, to set aside the word of God, at the very same time as suggesting to others that we are holier than them because of our observance of religious traditions! Questions 5-7 therefore try to get readers to realize these dangers human and religious traditions present for us and to think carefully about where

we might be tempted to set aside God's word to obey our traditions.

The passage indicates two things that can help us to avoid breaking "the commandment of God for the sake of [our] tradition" (v. 3). The first is to listen to the word of God! In this passage there is another example of what Jesus spoke about in chapter 13: that those who listen are given more. After Jesus gives the command to the crowd (which includes the Pharisees and scribes) to hear and understand that it is not what goes into someone's mouth that defiles them, but what goes out, the disciples come to Jesus and ask a further question (vv. 10-12). To them, more is given. Jesus then tells them a parable that Peter asks him to explain (vv. 13-15). And again, to them, more is given. We are therefore to "hear and understand" (v. 10) the word of God in our hearts.

The second thing is a warning against following blind guides. "Let them alone", Jesus commands in verse 14. If people are consistently prepared to override the word of God for the sake of human religious traditions, then they are in danger of falling into a pit and ought not be followed. Those planted by God the Father will seek to turn from doing this.

A danger for all of us with Jesus' words here is that we can think that the real problem is human traditions. But that isn't the real problem. Our great physician, Doctor Jesus, diagnoses that the use of human traditions is just a symptom of a disease deep within: that "their heart is far from me" (v. 8). The heart of the problem is the human heart. It is not eating with unwashed hands or what goes into someone's mouth that defiles them, but what comes out of it. In Mark 7:19 Jesus declares that all foods are clean. This idea is not as *explicitly* noted in this passage, yet it is implied in Jesus' comment that "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person" (v. 11). The things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these things defile them; and it is not just the words but the evil thoughts that come from the human heart as well. This points to the limitations of all human religious traditions: their inability to deal with the heart of the problem and change the human heart. Ultimately, for us to be clean we must be *made* clean and our hearts need to be changed.

Jesus' diagnosis of the problem is very different to that given by so many in our society. Many seek to explain bad behaviour in other ways, and the problem is often regarded as external to the people who act badly—it's a result of their upbringing, or the institutions around them, or their history. But Jesus sees that the problem is much closer to home. The problem is in us—within you and me. Our hearts are evil because we have evil thoughts, and our mouths give away the

condition of our hearts all too often. This message will cause offense to some when it is heard today, as it did when Jesus first spoke it.



To finish

As with any disease, the first step towards a remedy is a correct diagnosis. The aim of the final questions is to take people from seeing the problem of evil as being something 'out there' to recognizing it is something 'in here', in our hearts, and to respond appropriately.

Two appropriate ways to respond to Jesus' teaching here have already been outlined above: to "hear and understand" the word of God (v. 10), and to stop following blind guides. What this will lead us to do is then spelled out to us at the beginning of the next passage, where a woman comes to Jesus and cries out, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David" (v. 22).

LEADER NOTES

5. Who, then, can be clean?

MATTHEW 15:21-28

► Remember: 60/40/20

Getting started

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 24). Of all of Jesus’ words, these are perhaps among his least well known and least considered when thinking about his ministry before he was crucified. For much of the time, the fact that we don’t factor this into our thinking doesn’t cause too many problems—we can often make sense of Jesus’ actions without this context. But that is certainly not the case with this passage. In this study we’ll see that although Jesus was sent only for the lost sheep of Israel, God had already declared long beforehand (through the prophet Isaiah) that the benefits of the ministry of his Messiah would extend far beyond Israel:

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Isa 49:6)

The ‘Getting started’ question may seem a little strange at first but introduces a concept that the woman in the passage grasped well—that sometimes, things that appear at first to be purposed at benefitting one aspect of life actually have benefits that overspill into other areas too. Rain is like that, to some extent. Initially we might think of it primarily as giving us water to drink. But actually the benefits of

rain extend to many other spheres of life. For example, as it waters fields and allows for plants to grow, it in turn allows us to enjoy fruit and vegetables.

Studying the passage

This passage contains one of the most surprising and unusual interactions Jesus has with a person in any of the Gospels. A desperate woman comes to Jesus pleading for help for her daughter who is suffering terribly, but Jesus seemingly ignores her. When she persists, Jesus then appears to explain why he can't help her. When she persists further, his explanation as to why he can't help appears racist. Yet she carries on, with a comment that suggests she has very low self-esteem. Eventually, having appeared very reluctant, Jesus grants her request—but only after seeming to endorse the woman's lowly assessment of herself. Was it just to put an end to her annoying pleas (as it was in the case of the unjust judge in Luke 18:4-5)?

Like many passages in the Gospels, this narrative cries out to us that the Jesus of the Bible is very different to the Jesus of popular opinion. People may pick up on some or all of these things. Don't be alarmed if people initially express surprise, or even shock or disgust, at Jesus' behaviour. Question 1 is intended to give people an opportunity to express any surprise or shock.

Context is vital to properly appreciating any passage in the Gospel narratives—but perhaps it's even more crucial with this one. In the section immediately before this, the Pharisees and scribes had come to question Jesus about why his disciples didn't obey the tradition of the elders. To the Pharisees, it seemed as though these disciples had no concern for being spiritually clean and holy. But Jesus made it clear that it is actually the Pharisees who are defiled and who do not worship God.

We see in verse 21 that Jesus went away from that place “and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon”. This is most unusual, and perhaps indicates the seriousness of the attack that has been made on Jesus. He goes somewhere where he will be safe (for the time being) from further similar attacks. But more significant is where he withdraws *to*. The leaders from the ‘Holy City’ of Jerusalem have just insinuated that Jesus is unholy, and now Jesus withdraws from the holy land of Israel and goes to Tyre and Sidon—*Gentile* territory. Not only that, these were regions that were condemned in the Old Testament for their treatment of Israel (see, for example, Isaiah 23 for a prophecy against Tyre and Sidon).

Next, we find that a woman “from that region” comes to him (v. 22). She is identified as Canaanite woman, which is very significant. The Canaanites were the

people who were in the Promised Land before Israel, whom the Lord drove out and commanded Israel to destroy totally and have no mercy upon (Deut 7:1-2). But on top of that, this woman has a daughter who is demon-possessed. So this woman could not possibly be more ‘unclean’ in the eyes of the Pharisees. This is what questions 2 and 3 seek to draw out.

Matthew makes a deliberate comparison of the woman with the Pharisees and scribes who come from the ‘Holy City of David’ in the passage immediately before. This is highlighted later on in the study, in question 7. The Pharisees and scribes had not even addressed Jesus by name before asking questions, which were really accusations (vv. 1-2). But the Canaanite woman addresses him as “Lord, Son of David” (v. 22), and she comes with a request for mercy rather than an accusation of guilt. The title ‘Son of David’ is a common one in Matthew’s Gospel and is used on eight other occasions. It was a way of referring to God’s promised king, the Messiah, whom God promised would be from the line of David (2 Sam 7:11-16). The woman also contrasts sharply with those in Jesus’ hometown of Capernaum who did not have faith in Jesus and simply saw him as “the carpenter’s son” (13:55; question 8).

We read on to see that Jesus “did not answer her a word” (v. 23). Some may view this as rudeness on Jesus’ part—but that would be to over-interpret the point. There may be many other reasons why Jesus is silent. (Theologically, there is great encouragement here for our own prayer lives: the fact that the woman hears silence from Jesus doesn’t mean her request has been denied.)

What happens next is very important to observe (question 4). Jesus does not answer the woman, but she keeps crying out to him, so the disciples urge him to send her away (v. 23). (At this point, you might notice the parallel with the disciples’ behaviour later in the Gospel towards the little children who are taken to Jesus in Matthew 19:13-14.) But this is the very thing Jesus refuses to do; he doesn’t send her away.

Instead, he explains his dilemma: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 24). That is, Jesus’ mission was to the people of Israel. What the woman was requesting—a blessing that the Messiah would bring—is what had been promised to Israel first. The woman is undeterred: “Lord, help me” she cries (v. 25). He now addresses her directly, explaining by a parable the implication of his being sent to Israel: it would not be right to take food from the children and toss it to the dogs.

The woman’s response in verse 27 is extraordinary. It shows that she not only understood what Jesus was saying but that she agreed with it. She argues: “Yes,

Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table". That is, she is not wishing for Jesus to grant her request at the expense of his mission to Israel. But she recognizes, even at this stage, that his mission to Israel will have benefits that will overflow to others outside Israel. It is probably unlikely that this Canaanite woman knew what Isaiah had said about the Messiah being a light for the Gentiles as well as the Jews (Isa 49:6). Nevertheless, she somehow grasped Jesus' greatness and realized that the benefits of his ministry, as focused as it was on Israel before his death on the cross, would not be restricted to the nation of Israel alone.

We may baulk here at Jesus referring to Gentiles, and by implication this woman, as 'dogs'—and also at this woman being seemingly content to accept this description. But we need to realize what the imagery of the animals is—and isn't—conveying. After all, Jesus has just referred to Israel as sheep! Israel was God's son (Hos 11:1). Dogs, like pigs, were unclean (see Matt 7:6). In her acceptance of being referred to as a dog, the woman is recognizing that she is not part of the nation God regarded as his son, and that she is unclean.

Jesus then recognizes the Canaanite woman's great faith. Jesus makes this remark of only one other person (another Gentile, the Roman centurion in Matthew 8:10) in the whole of Matthew's Gospel. Her request is granted the moment Jesus speaks. Her faith is well placed, for it is placed firmly in him.



To finish

The beautiful reality of this passage is that it contains the model response to Jesus. It is very carefully placed within the narrative of Matthew's Gospel. The woman's cry of "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David" (v. 22) is the response we ought to have to the previous passage (15:1-20) about how it is what comes out of a person that defiles them. As Jesus himself identifies, this cry expresses the woman's great faith in him. It ought to be our response to everything we read in Matthew's Gospel, from Jesus' first call to repent issued in Galilee (Matt 4:17), through the ministry of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), and all his other speeches—and even as we hear him calling upon us to go and make disciples of all nations at the end of the Gospel (Matt 28:19).

The passage also reinforces another point. It is one that we can so easily forget or take for granted. It is that *anyone* who cries out to Jesus "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David" will be granted mercy—no matter how unclean or seemingly distant from God's people they might be.

LEADER NOTES

6. Understanding the signs of the times

MATTHEW 15:29-16:12

► Remember: 60/40/20

Getting started

To live well, you need to understand the times that you are living in. This is true in so many aspects of life. Whether it involves storing food before a famine or packing a rain jacket when you know it's going to rain, living well often involves rightly understanding the times you are living in. In this passage Jesus rebukes the Pharisees and Sadducees because, although they can rightly interpret signs in the weather, they cannot interpret the times that they are living in. They miss the signs that are right before them—that is, the ministry of Jesus. The 'Getting started' question therefore introduces this topic in a lighthearted way by getting people to think about how they interpret the signs the weather gives, and act accordingly.

Studying the passage

This passage begins with a strong sense of *déjà vu*! In verses 29-31 Matthew records the miraculous healing of many who came to Jesus beside the Sea of Galilee. This episode seems to echo the miracles that happened at Gennesaret in Matthew 14:34-36—again people are bringing the sick to Jesus, and they are healed.

But an even more striking repetition is the feeding miracle recorded in 15:32-39, which is similar in many ways to the feeding of the five thousand men (as well as women and children) recorded in Matthew 14:13-21 (question 1). Again, a large crowd comes to Jesus. They are in a remote place. There is not much food. He

has compassion on them. He takes a meagre amount of food. He gives thanks and then divides the food up with the disciples, who then give it to the crowds.

But there are differences between the two feeding miracle accounts too. In the earlier account, there were five loaves and two fish; here there are seven loaves and an unspecified number of fish. Previously there were five thousand men as well as women and children, here it is recorded that there were four thousand men, besides women and children. They are clearly different events—and yet they seem so closely paralleled. Even some of the differences seem to connect them somehow: the first feeding miracle happens after Jesus gets into a boat and he finishes by climbing a mountain; the second feeding miracle begins after Jesus climbs a mountain and ends with him getting into a boat. Matthew's record of these two events suggests that they are different feeding miracles, but that they are similar somehow. But what is their connection?

There are two clues to examine in answer to that question. The first is the context. Jesus withdrew to the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon in verse 21, and verses 21-28 record his interaction with a Gentile (Canaanite) woman. In that account, we saw that Jesus did not immediately grant the woman's request for mercy because he had been sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. The woman recognized this priority but also saw that the benefits would overflow to those outside Israel. Identifying her great faith, Jesus then granted the woman mercy and her daughter was healed. The significance of this is that the Canaanite woman received the same blessings that people in Israel had received.

The second clue comes in verse 31, where people glorify God after Jesus has healed people. That people were praising God was not unusual—it had happened before (e.g. Matt 9:8). But what is unusual is how God is identified. We are told “they glorified *the God of Israel*” (v. 31). This is not the typical way to describe God in Matthew's Gospel. It suggests that there were people who were not from Israel—people who had perhaps worshipped other gods—among those who were now praising the one true God in light of these healing miracles (question 2).

Taken together, these two things are helpful in working out the significance of this second feeding miracle being so similar to the first, which is the focus of question 3. The first healing miracle took place in Galilee, near Jesus' hometown, among the Jews. But this second feeding miracle takes place in an area where there are at least Gentiles present, and it may well even have been a predominantly Gentile crowd. Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman raised the question of whether the blessings of the Messiah were available to those outside Israel. The

healing of her daughter, the miracles beside the Sea of Galilee, and the second feeding miracle indicate that indeed they are. The fact that the second feeding miracle (before a Gentile crowd) is so similar to the first feeding miracle only emphasizes this point. Those outside of Israel will receive all the blessings that the people of Israel receive from the Messiah's ministry; they will not miss out on anything.

Given these events, what happens next is quite a surprise—and this is what question 5 aims to address. The Pharisees and Sadducees come to ask Jesus for a sign from heaven. As readers I think we're supposed to be shocked by this. Jesus' feeding miracles are strongly reminiscent of God's provision of manna from heaven to feed the people of Israel in the wilderness—yet now the Pharisees and Sadducees are asking for a sign from heaven! They have asked for a sign from heaven before (12:38), but now we are told they ask in order to test Jesus (16:1). They are acting just like the Israelites who tested God in the wilderness. Jesus identified the Pharisees and scribes as "blind guides" in Matthew 15:14. Now we see how blind they are, and that their blindness is wilful.

Jesus refuses their test. He points out that they are well able to interpret the signs in the weather, but they are not able to "interpret the signs of the times" (16:2-3). The issue is not that there is a need for signs from heaven; they just need to *understand* the signs that are already before them. In verse 4, Jesus repeats the answer he gave the last time the Pharisees and scribes asked for a sign (back in Matthew 12:39): "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah".

On that previous occasion, Jesus had added that, "The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here" (12:41). This aspect of the 'sign of Jonah' takes on particular significance now that we've heard of how Jesus was received by the people of Tyre and Sidon in Matthew 15. The reception of the ministry of the Messiah of Israel by the people outside of Israel is a more than convincing 'sign from heaven'—and yet the Pharisees and Sadducees demand something else.

We might initially feel that Jesus is a little harsh when he says, "an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign" (16:4). After all, we may also have wished for a sign to help us believe. We may know of others who say they would believe if only they were given a sign. But the difficulty with this approach, which is exemplified by the Pharisees and Sadducees, is that we are setting the *conditions* upon which

we will accept God's king. God has given us all the signs we need in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When we want other signs, we are actually rejecting or ignoring those ones he's already given us. So we need to look at and be thankful for those signs already given! Questions 7-8 seek to deal with these issues.

As Jesus departs from the Pharisees and crosses to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the disciples realize they have forgotten to bring bread. If we have been reminded again in this section of the reception of Jesus by the Gentiles, and of the hardening of the Pharisees against him, we are also reminded again of the dullness of the disciples. A lack of bread would surely be your last concern when you are with Jesus! The disciples understand in part, and yet are dull in other ways at this point in Matthew's Gospel—they are still marked by "little faith", as Jesus says in verse 8.

Jesus is not thinking about the bread when he warns the disciples to be wary of "the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (v. 6). He is referring to the Pharisees' teaching. We saw in Matthew 15 that the teaching on their lips comes from hearts that do not honour God; such teaching, while perhaps appearing outwardly righteous, is marked by hypocrisy and wickedness (see Matt 23:25-28).

To finish

This passage provides a challenge for us to avoid being like the Pharisees and Sadducees—appearing on the one hand as if we are seeking to know God, but in reality rejecting what he has shown us already. The way to be on our guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees is to look at the signs God has already given us in the ministry of Jesus, rather than demand that he show us the signs that we determine will convince us.

LEADER NOTES

7. How do you find life?

MATTHEW 16:13-28

► Remember: 60/40/20



Getting started

Towards the end of this passage, Jesus explains the incredibly great cost of being his disciple: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (v. 24). He makes it clear that following him involves nothing less than losing your life. In raising the ‘Getting started’ question, the aim is to prepare your group to think carefully about Jesus’ demands.

Studying the passage

This passage begins with Jesus moving into a new region, and Matthew focuses us initially on a discussion between Jesus and his disciples, which Jesus initiates with a question: “Who do the people say that the Son of Man is?” (v. 13). If the disciples’ understanding of popular opinion is correct, the overwhelming consensus is that Jesus is a prophet. While there may have been disagreement about whether Jesus was one of the ancient prophets brought back to life, or simply a new prophet, there is apparently general agreement on the fact that he is someone who speaks the words of God.

Jesus then asks his disciples, “But who do you [plural] say that I am?” (v. 15). Jesus clearly wants to see if the disciples share the widespread opinion of the people. The question in the narrative raises the issue of whether those to whom “the secrets of the kingdom of heaven” have been given (13:11) will have a different view of Jesus. Matthew gives us Peter’s response: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). The disciples have already acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God in Matthew 14:33. From the opening verse of his Gospel, Matthew

identifies Jesus for his readers as the Messiah (1:1). But now, for the first time, Jesus is unambiguously identified as the Messiah by a character within the narrative. Verse 20 suggests that all the disciples hold this opinion of who Jesus is. In the Gospel of Mark, Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah is the turning point in the narrative. That's not the case in Matthew's Gospel; instead, it's just another step in the disciples' understanding of who Jesus is and what he's come to do.

Jesus' response to Peter's confession (which is unique to Matthew's Gospel) is significant. First, he declares Peter to be blessed, as he has also said of those to whom the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven had been given (13:16). Next, he indicates how Peter knows this: it has been revealed by his "Father who is in heaven" (v. 17). Question 1 gives scope for reflecting on these things.

What Jesus goes on to say in verse 18 has been very controversial in the history of the church. Some have taken it to mean that the only true Christian church is the institution that can trace its leadership back to Peter, and only that church may determine who is 'in' and 'out' of the kingdom of heaven, since Peter was given the keys! Others, particularly anxious about the former suggestion, say that although the name 'Peter' in Greek means 'rock', when Jesus says "on this rock I will build my church" (v. 18) he was not talking about Peter, but about the *confession* Peter has just made—that Jesus is the Christ. In your study, it's possible that both these views will be suggested. The best approach is to keep coming back to Jesus' words and to insist on what he is saying, and what he is not.

Question 2 addresses what Jesus says about Peter's future. He seems to imply that Peter is going to play a foundational role in building the church. Jesus says he will give Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven (v. 19). What he says next is crucial, and the original Greek carries the idea a little more clearly than many of our English translations. Although it sounds more awkward in English, the translation given in a footnote of the ESV Bible conveys the sense of the Greek most closely:¹

"...whatever you bind on earth *shall have been bound* in heaven, and
whatever you loose on earth *shall have been loosed* in heaven."

¹ Often in our English translations of the Bible, there will be an alternative translation that is given in the footnotes. In many cases, this alternative is closer to the original language but sounds more awkward in English. Our translators helpfully serve us by providing the more awkward version in the footnotes.

This translation (which highlights the past tense of the action) shows more clearly that Peter is not going to be determining who is in and out of heaven. Rather, the decisions Peter makes about who is in and out of heaven *will have already been made in heaven*; that is, Peter's decisions will simply reflect those that God has already made.

Three times in the book of Acts, Peter declares what has already been bound in heaven. In Acts 2 he declares that the Holy Spirit has been poured out on Jesus' followers for the forgiveness of sins (vv. 33-39). In Acts 8, Peter and John confirm that the Samaritan believers receive the Holy Spirit. In Acts 10, Peter orders that, for the first time, Gentile believers be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, since they "have received the Holy Spirit" (v. 47). As he explains in Acts 11:17: "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" Peter therefore binds what has already been bound in heaven by baptizing the Gentile believers, and fulfils the role that Jesus had assigned him in Matthew 16 (question 3).

Matthew records that "from that time" Jesus began to explain to his disciples that "he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (v. 21). This indicates that Jesus had not spoken of these things previously. But from this point we see Jesus talking to his disciples at various times about these things (e.g. 17:12, 22-23; 20:17-19). Verse 21 gives a summary of what Jesus said "must" happen.

What happens next is surprising. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him, insisting this would never happen (v. 22). Jesus responds with the harsh words "Get behind me, Satan!" (v. 23). The one whom Jesus had just called 'blessed', he now addresses as Satan! Key to making sense of this is to remember that the greatest temptation Satan put before Jesus was to have the glory of being the Messiah without going the way of the cross (see Matt 4:8-10). Peter has failed to understand that Jesus was fulfilling the mission of the servant of Israel, who would *suffer* and *die* to restore his people (see Matt 8:14-17). Isaiah makes it clear that the 'suffering servant' is the Messiah (see Isaiah 61). Satan is not above using the closest and most committed friends to bring the greatest temptation.

Jesus then goes on to speak about the cost of being his disciple now, as well as the benefits in the future. Being a disciple now will mean denying yourself, taking up your cross and losing your life. If this life was all there was, choosing to follow Jesus would be foolish! But the benefits of being Jesus' disciple in the *future* will be finding life and being rewarded. Conversely, saving one's life and gaining the

whole world now will count for nothing in the future if you do not follow Jesus. It will ultimately mean losing your life and forfeiting your soul.

Jesus' comments here provide an important critique to a sadly common form of Christian teaching in our day that promises tangible prosperity (material, physical, emotional, social, etc.) in *this* age for those who follow Jesus. But Jesus' language of 'losing your life', 'taking up your cross' and 'denying yourself' shows that we shouldn't expect his promises of reward to be fulfilled until the harvest at the end of the age (see Matt 13:37-43; also 13:47-50). It's only then that evil will be punished and the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of Jesus' Father. To promise these things before then is premature and profoundly unhelpful.

Jesus goes on to promise that the Son of Man will come in his Father's glory and repay each person according to what he has done (v. 27). He raises the question of *when* this is going to happen in his next statement: "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (v. 28). Question 8 examines the prophecy of Daniel in relation to this point. In chapter 7, while Daniel is having a vision of other worldly kingdoms that rise and fall (which are represented by various animals), he has a vision about another kingdom coming—one that belongs to "one like a son of man" (v. 13). The figure of the "one like a son of man" in Daniel has much in common with the Messiah whom Isaiah speaks about. In particular, in verses 13-14, Daniel sees that this figure comes on the clouds and approaches the Ancient of Days—presumably God himself. He is then given all authority and sovereign power, an everlasting dominion, and a kingdom that will never be destroyed. Daniel also sees that all peoples and nations worship this figure. (This probably explains why Jesus is so keen to use the term 'Son of Man' to refer to himself in his own ministry.)

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, after Jesus has risen from the dead, he declares in a brief speech (known as the Great Commission) that "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (28:18). This language is very reminiscent of Daniel 7:14. Consequently he tells his disciples to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (v. 19). So in light of Daniel's prophecy, we're to understand that Jesus, the Son of Man, comes in his kingdom *after he has risen from the dead*. The disciples do not taste death before they see that. Questions 8, 9 and 10 should help your group to reach this conclusion.

Clearly, if we are to deny ourselves, pick up our crosses and lose our lives, we need to trust that the one who promises us life can be trusted in what he says about the future. Matthew 17 will give us further reasons to be able to trust Jesus' word.

But for now, within these verses we can see Jesus speaking clearly about his future with complete accuracy. When it comes to the future, Jesus knows what he is talking about and can be trusted in what he says (question 11).



To finish

This leads us to think about whether we're living according to Jesus' words about the future. The final questions get us to examine the things we might need to give up—or be *prepared* to give up—in order to follow Jesus and to hold onto eternal life. The study began by examining whether there were beliefs to die for, and what it would take to convince us to be prepared to die for something or someone. The study ends by getting people to reflect on why they should be prepared to do this in order to follow Jesus, who was prepared to give up his life for a cause, and yet who also gained his life by losing it.

LEADER NOTES

8. Listen to the Son who pays taxes

MATTHEW 17

► Remember: 60/40/20



Getting started

This passage ends with Jesus getting Peter to pay a tax he doesn't have to pay, and the means by which Jesus does this are extraordinary. He gets Peter to find a four-drachma coin in the mouth of the first fish he catches, and use that to pay for both their taxes! This fish-paying tax miracle certainly shows that Jesus has extraordinary power. But lying behind this is something even more extraordinary: he uses his power to serve others rather than himself. As the Son of God (see 12:28 and 14:33), he is exempt from paying the temple tax. Yet he pays the tax and avoids causing unnecessary offense, rather than serving himself. The 'Getting started' question is a little unusual, but it is aimed at getting the group to think about how powerful people often approach tax. This question should enable the group to better appreciate later in the study how extraordinary it is that the Son of Man comes to suffer, serve, and pay taxes he doesn't have to.

Studying the passage

The passage begins with the transfiguration of Jesus on a mountain. This is obviously an extraordinary event, and question 1 is a comprehension question aimed at helping your group to look closely at what exactly happened on the mountain where this occurs. Question 2 focuses on what was spoken by the voice from heaven at the event. At Jesus' baptism God had spoken saying, "This is my

beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17). The statement echoed important parts of the Old Testament. The first part (“This is my beloved Son”) comes from Psalm 2:7 (cf. 2 Sam 7:14-15), which speaks of God’s kingly Messiah who would inherit the ends of the earth from the Lord, and break the nations like pottery. The second part (“with whom I am well pleased”) echoes the first of the so-called ‘servant songs’ of Isaiah (Isa 42:1), which speak of one who will ultimately suffer and die on behalf of Israel (and who is identified as the Messiah in Isaiah 61). Now, this same voice from heaven echoes these important parts of Scripture to identify Jesus not only as the Messiah (as Peter recognized in 16:16) but also as the Messiah *who will be the suffering servant*—which Peter had not factored in. That Jesus is again identified in this way, at this time, to these three disciples suggests it was intended as an encouragement to them. In a sense, they get a foretaste of Jesus’ glory so that they will not dismiss him as he endures suffering.

But the voice from heaven says something additional to what was said at Jesus’ baptism (question 3). It’s a command: “Listen to him” (v. 5). Jesus has just spoken radically about the future, saying that it is better to lose one’s life for his sake now than to save it, because in the future this will be the difference between saving one’s life and losing it. What authority does Jesus have to make such bold claims? Why should the disciples believe him at this time? Because the voice from heaven says, even in the presence of the great prophets of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, “Listen to him”.

As the three disciples come down from seeing Jesus’ glory, they still have questions. “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” they wonder aloud (v. 10). The scribes were not mistaken in thinking the Old Testament had promised that Elijah would come before the day of the Lord. The prophet Malachi had indicated that Elijah would come before the day of the Lord and either turn the hearts of people back to God or bring a curse. After the messenger Elijah had arrived, the Lord himself would come to the temple. But the scribes had not realized that *John the Baptist* was the promised Elijah. The messenger had already come! They should have recognized him; his curious dress and diet (Matt 3:4) had pointed directly to his identity as the promised Elijah (cf. 2 Kgs 1:8; Zech 13:4; Lev 11:22). But after speaking with Jesus, this is something that the disciples at least do come to realize (v. 13).

The fact that ‘Elijah’ has already come in the person of John the Baptist is immensely significant (question 5). It means that “the great and awesome day of the **LORD**” (Mal 4:5) could now be expected, where God himself would come

to his temple. But, as Jesus tells us in verse 12, the rejection of John the Baptist meant something terrible was also going to happen. That John the Baptist had suffered and been killed is a forerunner to what will happen to the Son of Man, Jesus explains.

We have seen in our previous studies that the disciples understand Jesus' parables (13:51), and up to a point they seem to have 'ears to hear' and so are 'given more' knowledge. And yet at the same time, they "are still without understanding" (15:16, 16:9). In the middle of chapter 17 we see that they have reason to feel discouraged (question 6). They had not been able to heal a man's son who had been suffering greatly from seizures caused by a demon, and Jesus had explained that this was a result of them having "little faith" (v. 20). On top of this, Jesus had already said that he was going to be handed over to the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law to be killed (16:21) and he reiterates that in this passage (vv. 22-23), as well as emphasizing in verses 12-13 that he will suffer like John the Baptist did. This causes the disciples to be "greatly distressed" (v. 23), which highlights yet again the disciples' lack of understanding (question 7).

This passage finishes with an account that is unique to Matthew's Gospel. Back in his hometown, the collectors of the temple tax come and enquire (read: accuse!) about whether Peter's teacher pays the temple tax. It seems Jesus hadn't yet paid it. Peter, however, believed Jesus did pay the tax and tells the tax collectors so.

In a situation we have become familiar with in Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus and his disciples go into a private setting, his disciples are given more knowledge. This is what happens now as Jesus asks Peter whether kings collect taxes from their children or from others (v. 25). Peter doesn't hesitate in answering correctly: they collect it from others (v. 26). Jesus explains the implication of this—that the children are exempt. The implication is that *Jesus* is exempt from paying the temple tax since it is where his Father in heaven dwells.

So what Jesus does next is astonishing. Not only is he so in control of creation that he can order Peter to go fishing and cause the first fish he catches to have exactly the amount required to pay the temple tax (v. 27), but—perhaps even more astonishingly—he who has *such* power at his disposal doesn't stand on his rights, nor does he offend unnecessarily, nor does he act to bring glory to himself. Rather, he seeks to use his power to serve others and pay taxes that he is actually exempt from.

Looking back through the whole passage, Jesus makes a number of extraordinary claims, just as he has from the moment his ministry began in Galilee. Question 9 gives people an opportunity to identify these. Jesus again claims repeatedly that he is going to be raised from the dead (vv. 9, 23). He also implies that he is the son of the one who dwells in the temple, that he is God himself, when he is asked to pay the temple tax (vv. 25-26). He also claims that nothing will be impossible for his disciples, and that they will be able to move mountains if they have even the tiniest faith (v. 20). (Here, he may have been alluding to Zechariah 14:4, which speaks about the Mount of Olives splitting in two on the day of the Lord. Jesus' point may be that a time is coming where, if they believe, his disciples will enter into the age of God's kingdom, rather than suggesting they will be able to do any sort of magic tricks they wish to do!)

Throughout this chapter these extraordinary claims are supported by extraordinary events. For example, as he is transfigured on the mountain, he appears with Moses and Elijah and is endorsed by none other than the voice from heaven. This voice had also spoken to Moses in Exodus 34 and to Elijah in 1 Kings 19, and was identified as God himself. Jesus also heals the demon-possessed boy in a moment (v. 18) and he pays the temple tax (from which he is exempt) by the most extraordinary means (v. 27).

These appear to be particularly timely encouragements for the disciples to keep following the Son of Man, whom they may not have completely understood but whom they have understood well enough to continue to follow, and to keep asking about the kingdom of heaven (18:1).

To finish

It is a great advantage to have the disciples as characters in the narrative, because they are just like us in many ways! Like us, they listen, hear, and understand, and so are given more—but they also doubt and lack understanding. The disciples were discouraged, distressed and doubted Jesus, and it can be just like that for us today too. That is part of the genius of a passage like this. In the same way as they encouraged the disciples at the time, the truths found in this passage can also provide a wonderful encouragement for us as we see that Jesus truly is the Messiah, the Son of Man and the Son of God, who spoke from heaven. It encourages us to keep listening to him, even when we are distressed, discouraged or doubting.

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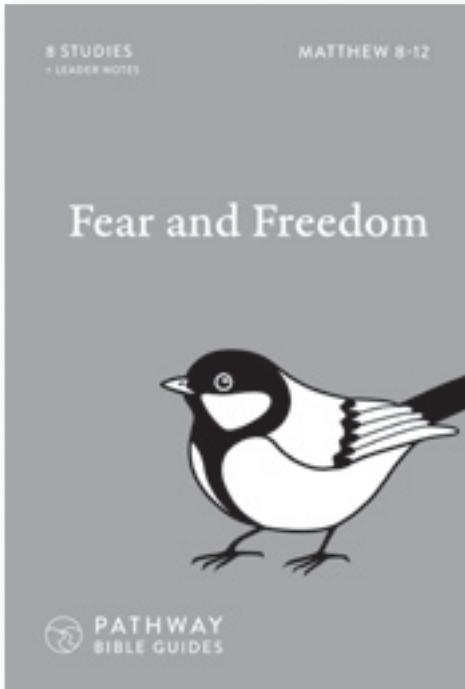
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Fear and Freedom

By Peter Collier



This simple guide to chapters 8-12 of Matthew's Gospel introduces us to the early years of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus is revealed as a man of authority and compassion—yet not just a man, for he speaks and acts with the power of God. Follow Jesus from fear to freedom.

8 studies. Leader notes included.

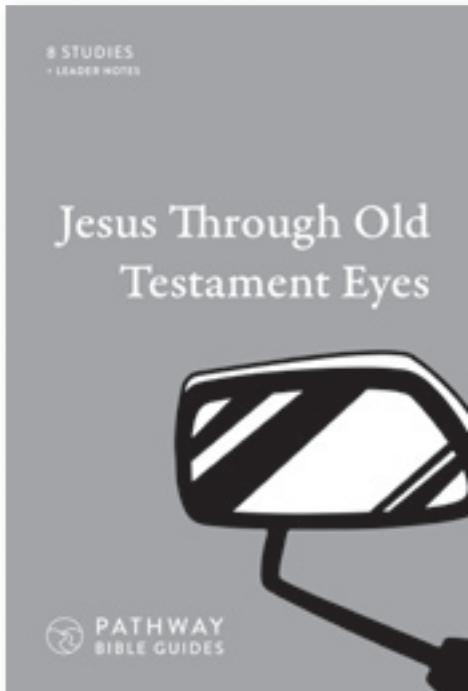
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Jesus Through Old Testament Eyes

By Matthew Jensen



Our world today overflows with ideas and misunderstandings about Jesus. Who was he, really? What did he think about himself? How can we get at the truth about him today, 2000 years later? Amid the enormous diversity of views on offer, is there any way to really grasp the truth about Jesus?

In this series of eight studies, Matthew Jensen answers these crucial questions by guiding us through several key Bible passages, showing that amid the competing opinions, there is a way forward: seeing Jesus as he saw himself, through the 'glasses' of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Jesus Through Old Testament Eyes shows how and why the Old Testament is the indispensable key to properly understanding the life and ministry of the most extraordinary person who ever lived. It will help you to grow in your understanding of the Bible's big picture, and in your appreciation for the Lord Jesus and all he accomplished.

8 studies. Leader notes included.

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